

Modals

Permission

- **may** used for **permission**: forms

‘**may**’ for all persons in the present and the future. **Might** in the conditional and after verbs in a past tense.

Negative: may not/ mayn’t. Might not/mightn’t. Interrogative: may I? Might I?

‘**may**’ is followed by the bare infinitive.

- ‘**can**’ used for **permission**

Can for all persons in the present and the future. Could for past and conditional.

Negative: cannot/ can’t, could not/ couldn’t. Interrogative: can I? Could I?

‘**can**’ is followed by the bare infinitive.

- ‘**may**’ and ‘**can**’ used for permission in the present or future.

A – First person

I/ we can is the most usual form. *E.g. I can take a day off whenever I want.*

I/ we may meaning ‘I/ we have permission to....’ is possible.

E.g. I may leave the office as soon as I have finished.

But this is not a very common construction and it would be much more usual to say:

I can leave/ I’m allowed to leave.

B- Second person

Here ‘**may**’ is chiefly used when the speaker is giving permission.

E.g. You may park here means ‘I give you permission to park’.

‘**can**’ can be used as an informal alternative to ‘**may**’ here. But it can also be used to express the idea of having permission. *E.g. you can park here* can mean you have the right to park here.

C- Third person

'**may**' can be used as in **B** above when the speaker is giving permission:

E.g. *He may take my car.* (I give him permission to take it)

But it is chiefly used in impersonal statements concerning authority and permission:

E.g. *If convinced, an accused person may* (= has the right to) appeal.

Requests for permission

A- can I ? could I?, may I? might I ? are all possible and can be used for the present or future. Can I? is the most informal
could I? is the most generally useful of the four, as it can express both formal and informal requests.

Possibility

A- may/might for possibility

May/might +present infinitive can express possibility in the present or future:

He may/might tell his wife. (Perhaps he tells/ he will tell his wife)

- might must be used in the **conditional** and when the expression is introduced by a verb in the past tense: e.g. *If you invited him he might come.*

B- can used to express possibility

A- General possibility: subject + **can** can mean 'it is possible', i.e. circumstances permit (this is quite different from the kind of possibility expressed by **may**)
E.g. *You can ski on the hills. There is enough snow.*

C- **can can express occasional possibility**: e.g. *measles can be quite dangerous.* (Sometimes it is possible for them to be quite dangerous/sometimes they are quite dangerous).

Should and Must

should: is used to express the subject's obligation or duty or to indicate a correct or sensible action: e.g. *They shouldn't allow parking here; the street is too narrow.*

Here there is neither the speaker's authority, as with must. It is a matter of conscious or good sense.

Another difference between **should** and **must** is that with must and **have to** we normally have the impression that the obligation is being or will be fulfilled. With should we do not necessarily feel that the obligation is being or will be fulfilled. E.g. *If a driver says I should go slowly here* implies that he isn't going to go slowly. If he really intended to go slowly he would say: I must go/ have to go slowly here.

must can express obligation and emphatic advice:

E.g. Father: you must get up earlier in the morning. (Obligation)

You must take more exercise. Join a squash club. (Advice)